

# Ancient paths

The tombs and castles of the Boyne Valley reveal an often-overlooked side of Irish history, writes Nicola Brady

It's pitch black inside the ancient burial chamber. I can't see a thing – not the 5,000-year-old carvings on the stone walls, not the 10 other people huddled under the domed ceiling, not even my own feet. But then, a solitary stream of light slowly creeps in through the tunnelled entrance, growing longer with each second.

This amber beam only enters the Stone Age monument of Newgrange around the winter solstice, when the sun aligns with its entrance, filling this Neolithic chamber with a warm glow.

But you don't need to visit at solstice to see the spectacle. Each day, guides flick a switch to mimic the illumination on every tour of this mysterious site, which dates from 3,200BC – making it older than the Pyramids of Giza and Stonehenge. "In the darkest of places, there is light," my guide says, as the beam of light reaches our feet.

#### IRELAND'S ANCIENT EAST

While Newgrange is a popular attraction, it's not often seen by first-time visitors. I've lived in

Ireland for 18 years and this was my first visit. The Boyne Valley, the area in which Newgrange sits, is even less explored. When most people come to Ireland, they tend to hop between Dublin, Kerry and Galway, perhaps with a visit to Northern Ireland. But that's what makes the Boyne Valley, in County Meath and County Louth, ideal for clients who think they've seen all that Ireland has to offer.

Conveniently, Newgrange is only a 30-minute drive from Dublin airport, though tickets must be booked in advance (from €10). While the huge, hobbit-esque grassy dome gets most of the attention, tickets also include a visit to the Knowth Passage Tomb.

#### CASTLE ON THE HILL

For a slice of more recent history, the Battle of the Boyne Visitor Centre, set in a Palladian mansion, is a 15-minute drive away. You wouldn't guess that the elegant 18th-century house and grounds stand on the site of one of Ireland's bloodiest clashes. On July 11, 1690, an enormous battle saw some 60,000 men – divided between the sides of ➤

Newgrange ancient burial mound  
© Tourism Ireland/  
 Brian Morrison



## DESTINATIONS

### UK & IRELAND | BOYNE VALLEY



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT:** Winter solstice experience at Newgrange; traditional drum lesson at Causey Farm; Trim Castle; The Glyde Inn at Annagassan **PICTURES:** Tourism Ireland/Brian Morrison; Fáilte Ireland; Shutterstock/JeniFoto

the Protestant King William III and the deposed Catholic King James II – meet on this sloping green pasture.

For more impressive historical sites, Trim Castle looks like something straight from the pages of a fairytale. Featured in *Braveheart*, the ruin is accessible only via a guided tour (from €5), which will make sense when visitors squeeze up the spiral staircases and out onto the roof, which offers gorgeous views over the town and surrounding fields.

Trim itself is a pretty little place, with pastel-coloured houses lining narrow streets. Just off the main street there are crumbling ruins, graveyards and a striking cathedral.

“Trim is so full of medieval ruins, it would be very easy to give you loads of stories on the history,” says local guide Cynthia Simonet, as she takes us around the town wielding her carved wooden walking stick. “However, I prefer the mythological stories. I love the story of the black dog – in Irish, the *cú sídhe* – walking the streets of the town late at night, hoping to catch a soul that it can take back to the otherworld. So many local people will tell you about seeing him, but managed to escape to tell the tale.”

These mythological stories come to the forefront during the annual Púca festival in October. Stand still in Ireland for more than 10 minutes and someone will tell you that Ireland is the birthplace of Halloween. Trim’s recently revived Púca is a celebration of Samhain traditions, featuring huge parades with fire performers, epic puppetry and music gigs, which make an excellent sell for an autumn break.

### COASTAL CHARM

This region is oh-so-close to the Irish Sea coast. I was blessed with a sunny day as I drove to the village of Annagassan, which is home to The Glyde Inn. This old pub gives off a shabby-chic vibe at the front (think antique beer bottles on uneven shelves) but opens into a seafood restaurant at the back, within pebble-skimming reach of the sea.

Every day, they serve up whatever’s hauled off the boats. I tucked into slippery razor clams, fat crab claws and glistening local oysters, along with an entire black sole served dripping in a beurre blanc and a bright green dollop of colcannon – a buttery mashed potato blended with sea radish so fresh I saw the chef jump the fence to harvest it from the shore.

The Glyde Inn also offers a new virtual reality experience, where clients don a high-tech headset and follow the story of Bjorn the Bear, a dashing fictional Viking who shows travellers what the village looked like when it was the capital of Viking Ireland. The venue also runs traditional music sessions alongside epic feasts (experiences start from €55).

Similarly, clients can head to Causey Farm, where they’ll be able to make brown Irish soda bread, learn how to play the *bodhran* drum or dance a jig.

The Boyne Valley is best paired with a city break in Dublin, or a week exploring the rest of Ireland. Either way, a place that combines Neolithic history with fiery parades and fresh seafood is certainly worth a pit stop on your clients’ next Irish adventure. **TW**

### WHAT’S NEW IN THE BOYNE VALLEY

**Emerald Park:** This rebranded theme park close to the border with County Dublin has a new area, Tír na Nóg, with two rollercoasters. From €43. [emeraldpark.ie](http://emeraldpark.ie)

**River rafting:** A rafting tour operated by Trim-based Boyne Valley Activities allows clients to paddle through gentle River Boyne waters that pass by castle relics and medieval churches. From €60. [boynevalleyactivities.ie](http://boynevalleyactivities.ie)

**Boyne Valley to Lakelands Greenway:** Ireland has several Greenways – decommissioned train tracks that have been converted into walking and biking trails. One of the newest is this 19-mile stretch, which clients can join at Park Beo Greenway Hub. Bike hire from €15 per hour. [feelgoodbicycles.ie](http://feelgoodbicycles.ie)



### BOOK IT

**McKinlay Kidd’s** 10-night self-drive, Slowly Discovering Ireland’s Ancient East, starts from £1,295 in October, including some excursions but not car hire or flights. The suggested route features a day at Newgrange and can be tailor-made to incorporate more Boyne Valley sights. [mckinlaykidd.com](http://mckinlaykidd.com)

**Aer Lingus** operates nine daily flights between Heathrow and Dublin, from £60 one-way. It also has services from 15 other airports in the British Isles, including Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and Bristol. [aerlingus.com](http://aerlingus.com)

Find out more about the Boyne Valley at [discoverboynevalley.ie](http://discoverboynevalley.ie)